

Entering Irene Thanh Pham's classroom, you would understand how the essences of Vietnamese and American cultures could intertwine at school. The classroom is vibrant with a student writing showcase, a quote in English from Martin Luther King, Jr. with an equivalent Vietnamese proverb on the wall, and a corner dedicated to books in both languages. Despite such a diverse dynamic, one unified theme underlies every aspect: identity awareness and educational equity under the form of languages and content mastery.



Photo by Adela Thach

Irene Thanh Pham in her dual language classroom in Seattle, Washington; the proverb above the whiteboard means "Manners before knowledge" and is commonly found in classrooms in Vietnam.



**Irene's classroom at White Center Heights Elementary School in Seattle, Washington**



**For the corner library in her classroom, Irene likes to choose reading materials that are culturally relevant to her students, such as books about Vietnamese culture, American culture, Vietnamese-American culture, immigration, identity, and related topics.**

Irene is a fifth-grade teacher in a dual language (DL) program at White Center Heights Elementary School in Seattle, Washington state. Her full name reveals a bit about her background: a Vietnamese-American. Since she immigrated to the United States at 14, her journey to a career in education was not always rosy. One reason, she feels, was her accent. “I was too self-conscious about it,” Irene said, “so I didn’t have any confidence in teaching in English. None of my teachers or those I assisted had

that problem. As a result, I wasn’t proud of this part of my identity as a Vietnamese-American immigrant.”

It wasn’t until her internship at Everest Education (E2), a private learning center in Vietnam, that Irene gained her confidence. “That was the first time I felt I belonged to a community,” she said. “Teachers there aren’t judged because of their accent. They teach, and they’re confident, and they’re proud of it. If they can do it, so can I. One of the fellow teachers told me that my accent was charming, and that was the start of me learning to embrace this bit of my identity. I also had a mentor, and he was my role model. He provided me rooms for hands-on practice, reflection, and growth, instead of overthinking in theories, and he shared with me his previous experience teaching elementary as a Filipino-American teacher.”

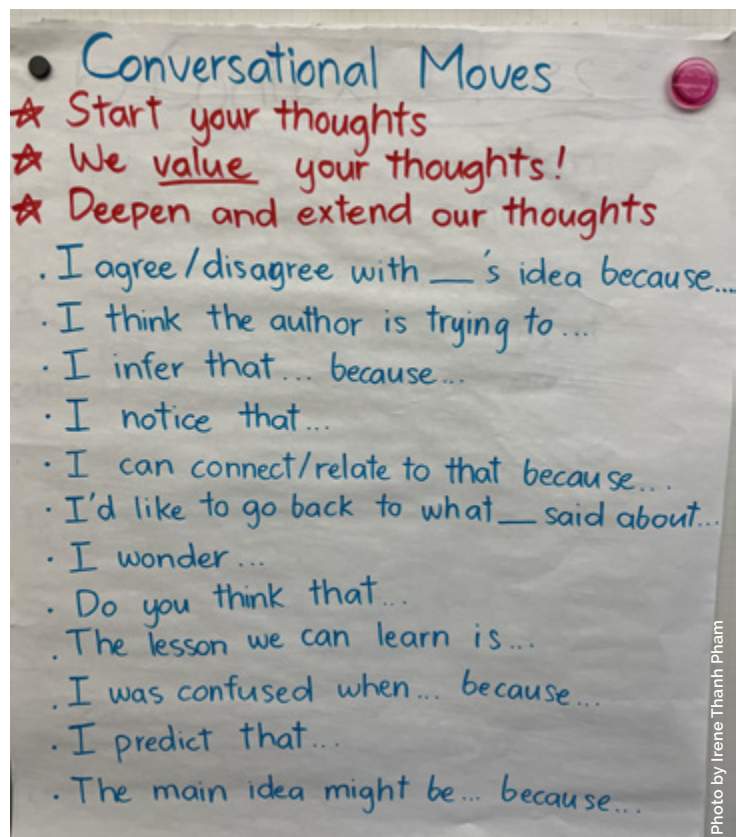
Irene was eager to become a full-time teacher, so after her graduation, she returned to Vietnam and continued honing her teaching skills at E2. There, Irene was exposed to an ideal learning community of practice for instructional improvement: a culture of innovation demonstrated by employing a growth mindset and blended learning in the classroom, ongoing professional development and mentoring, and constant teaching challenges for personal growth. Yet, after a year, something was still lingering in her mind. “Most students at E2 come from international schools,” she said. “With that wealthy background, they already have a lot of advantages. But for me, I want to serve a community that I share similar background and connections with, a community that needs more support. I want to teach in a public school.” Under a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation scholarship, Irene returned to the University of Washington to get a master’s degree in a program specifically for those who want to be elementary bilingual teachers.

The aim of the DL program—also known as the dual immersion program—is to enhance educational equity. Breaking the misconception that multilingualism is a

deficit, research has shown that proficiency in more than one language can improve cognitive flexibility and communication skills (Esposito and Baker-Ward 2013), enhance career opportunities (Rumbaut 2014), and promote cross-cultural understanding (Tochon 2009). Although some people might perceive that acquiring knowledge of both languages would slow down English literacy, students in the DL program can do as well as, or even outperform, children instructed only in English (August and Shanahan 2006).

In Washington, this program has been implemented at 56 school districts and six state-tribal education compact schools, encompassing partner languages such as Spanish, Mandarin, Vietnamese, and tribal languages. Depending on students' demographic in that community, schools will decide what partner language is employed. The goal is for students to become proficient and literate in both languages while achieving academic standards in all subject areas. To make sure students reach that goal, the teachers deliver content-based instruction in two languages: the partner language in the morning and English in the afternoon, or vice versa. In classes with students from diverse backgrounds like this, classmates can collaboratively help each other using the language they are most familiar with. That is not always the case, however, so it's up to the teachers' flexibility and adaptation to detect and provide students' needs.

Parents who register their children in the DL program hope this is the way to preserve their heritage, culture, and language. This is also a chance for the parents to have a positive relationship with the public-school system. When the teacher shares the same language as the parents, it's easier to communicate, and the school can help parents navigate challenges beyond academics. Interestingly, some parents from different ethnicities or mixed backgrounds also want their children to join the DL program so that the children learn a third language besides English and their mother tongue.



**This chart with sentence stems helps students to, in Irene's words, "focus on themselves and use their voice to speak up with their opinion."**

"This program is a good fit for me," Irene reflected. "Most of my students are Vietnamese-American or children of immigrants, so we have a similar background and growing-up experience. It helps me understand them a bit more and helps connect with their family. I feel like I'm a connecting piece between Vietnamese and American cultures. In our classroom or community, we have the space to connect Vietnamese and American cultures, understanding we can be both, or more of one than the other, and that is valid and powerful."

Yet challenges arise every day, sometimes from cultural differences. For example, Asian culture emphasizes filial piety, or respect for elders. Students tend to be well-behaved in class and to listen to teachers, but they also tend to internalize their opinions and feelings. Typically, they don't respond easily or vocalize their thoughts because they rarely learn how to do so at home. To handle this,

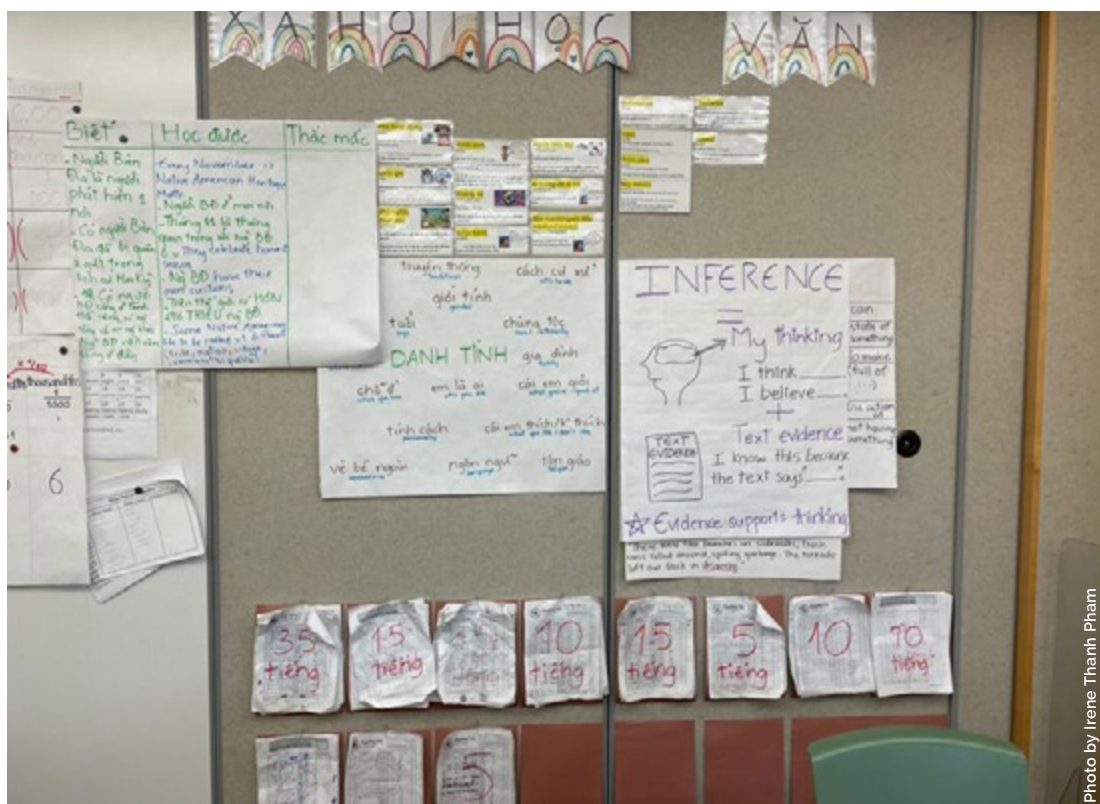


Photo by Irene Thanh Pham

**Materials on the wall of Irene's classroom reflect the dual language (in this case, Vietnamese and English) program at White Center Heights.**

Irene uses multiple techniques in class. “At the beginning of the school year, I did a lot of identity activities,” she said. “Students got a chance to think about who they are, what kind of community they identify with, and different aspects of their identity. The meaning of their name is one example; also their pronoun, their gender, or languages that they use at home. These identity-focused activities help students build confidence in themselves and positive self-esteem. For daily class activities, I use a lot of sentence stems starting with the pronoun ‘I’ such as ‘I think ... because ...’; ‘I agree/disagree with that idea because ...’; and ‘I feel ... when ... because ...’ This really helps them focus on themselves and use their voice to speak up with their opinion.”

Irene also loves using reflection activities like journal writing and community meetings. Another activity she finds effective with her learners is think-pair-share. Students first think on their own, then share with their peers to practice, and finally talk with everyone in a circle of trust. “We learn how to

listen and talk respectfully,” Irene said. “Even if we disagree, we disagree with the idea, not the speaker.” These activities help students recognize that their voice and opinion matter.

Irene values personalizing her lessons to meet students’ needs, and this has helped her navigate the COVID pandemic. When students finally returned to school after having had different experiences during virtual learning, she found that the skill levels in the class had become somewhat distorted by students’ diverse capabilities and experiences, and not all students were at their expected grade level. Irene employed the station rotation model, adopted from her internship in Vietnam, to target students’ specific needs and differentiation. The lesson starts with a whole-class activity to activate students’ knowledge before they are divided into groups, often based on their needs and capabilities with that particular content. The groups rotate through three stations to receive personalized lessons. At one station, students use an adaptive learning platform on

computers to do exercises, while the group at another station focuses on comprehending books that they are actually interested in and that are at their level.

The most special station is where Irene sits and scaffolds students' language or skills. She explained, "For example, today we learn about identifying the main idea and details by reading a book, and I know students in one group can't comprehend that skill yet. So in my station, I will first teach them about phonics using words from the book and leave the skill lesson for tomorrow. For the group that could acquire the skill but are not ready to write their statement, I would do multiple choice with them. And for the group that is right at their grade level, I challenge them to come up with the statement in their own words. Eventually, we hope that the phonic group can move to answer the multiple-choice questions, the multiple-choice group can move to write in their own words, and the grade-level group can compare and contrast the main ideas of different texts." Irene believes that the station rotation model works well, and she noted that students have made noticeable progress since she began using it.

The concept of personalization seems ideal, yet teachers must take on extensive material modification and adaptation. Teaching the Vietnamese language with little coaching and support is also a challenge. Amidst that extra workload, Irene actively looks for and adapts tools and strategies for multilingual students, one of which is Project GLAD (Guided Language Acquisition Design). Meanwhile, learning goals vary from state to state, and Washington, with its aim of languages and content mastery, is setting its own unique path.

But these challenges have not stamped out Irene's passion for teaching. "At the end of the day," she said, "what really keeps us going are family connections and students that we work with. It's about honoring and preserving our culture, community, and language. For me, being a Vietnamese-American teacher in this program is not just about teaching students

how to read or write in both languages, but also teaching them how to be proud of their identity and how to navigate in the American society with that identity. They start with learning about their identities and privileges that might benefit them in the world, and the challenges that different groups of people have faced, to how they can use their voice to advocate not just for themselves but also for other communities. I want them to build good character and not just intelligence. I think that's what keeps me going."

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